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ABSTRACT

Practical classroom activities for teaching narrative/descriptive writing exist which are based on approaches to teaching writing that research indicates improve the quality of student writing. Teachers need to do less lecturing to students about what they should be doing in their writing and more actively involve their students in the learning of skills and strategies. Writing activities should focus on developing strategies important to writing in the prewriting stage of the composing process and involve active/experiential learning. Activities such as "The Snake," "In the Act," and the "Voluptuary" focus on getting students to use many specific details, combine the sense, and use figurative language. Research is also very clear about "criteria-guided revision," instruction that focuses on scales, criteria, and specific questions which students can apply to their own or others' writing. There are a number of good reasons why teachers should use peer evaluation in teaching writing (including revision as a part of the writing process), but there are also problems with this approach (such as students having trouble being critical of their peers' writing). Criteria guided revision activities that use peer response groups work best just before students are given their final assignments. Teachers who use these types of activities will see the quality of their students' writing begin to improve. (Contains 43 references. An appendix presents numerous student activity sheets, student writing samples, and evaluation sheets.) (RS)

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TEACHING DESCRIPTIVE/NARRATIVE WRITING: STRATEGIES FOR MIDDLE AND SECONDARY STUDENTS

ED 379 665

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INTRODUCTION

Well before the Twentieth Century, a tradition had been established in the teaching of composition in American education. The teaching of composition begins with a thorough knowledge of *Language*, which means grammar, including parts of speech, the nature of the sentence, parsing, diagramming, and/or sentence correction exercises. Once the student has mastered these language skills or is in the process of mastering them, then the student is ready for advanced study, or *Composition*, which primarily consists of the study of prose structures, usually models of exemplory writing by professional writers, followed by the writing of practice themes, followed by error correction (Tchudi and Mitchell 1989). Over the years, this tradition has been challenged, and in recent years it has even undergone some minor changes with the addition of the composing process to the teaching of composition. That is, most textbooks now include a section where students are taken through *The Composition Process*, as if there is only one, and taught that there are three stages they must go through, prewriting,

writing, and revising (and revising usually means error correction). In short, all that the great writing revolution has really meant is that the writing process has been grafted onto the traditions we have inherited. What we as English teachers must recognize is that the roots of language and composition study run deep (Tchudi and Mitchell 1989; Johannessen 1995).

More important, if we really want to help our students learn how to write, then we need to begin looking beyond the traditional ways we have taught language and composition and try some new strategies that are based on sound theory and research and good practice. For example, after nearly a hundred years of research on the relationship between the study of traditional school (Latinate) grammar and writing, not one research study has shown that studying traditional grammar actually improves student writing. In fact, research indicates that studying grammar in isolation (that is, apart from a student's own writing, such as out of a grammar book) and with a heavy emphasis on mechanics and usage (such as marking every error) actually has a deleterious effect on student writing (Hillocks, 1986, 1987). Teachers who are concerned with teaching standard usage and typographical conventions should teach them in the context of real writing problems.

In contrast, research has shown that teaching sentence combining; that is, the practice of having students learn how to build more complex sentences from simpler ones, is very effective. In fact, sentence combining is more than twice as effective as free writing as a means of enhancing the quality of student writing. Yet, if you look at most middle and secondary composition textbooks, you will find some emphasis on freewriting as a prewriting strategy, usually to help students generate ideas for writing, but you won't find much emphasis, if at all, on sentence combining. Also, of

course, you will still find plenty of traditional grammar--rules and exercises. My point, with all of this is that we really need to begin using strategies for teaching composition that we know will improve the quality of student writing, particularly with writing assessment (IGAP) looking over our shoulders.

Fortunately, research/theory (and sound practice) in the teaching of composition have a great deal to say to us about what and how we might best teach writing to our students. And what I am going to try to accomplish here today is to talk about a few strategies that research indicates are effective at improving student writing, and then I will present a few classroom tested activities, some of which I will ask you to do pretty much as I would have students do them, which illustrate key features of what research says works. The activities I am going to present focus on descriptive/narrative writing.

PREWRITING STRATEGIES--ACTIVE/EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES

The research is very clear about one thing we can do to help our students improve their writing. We need to do less telling or lecturing to students (or what researchers call presenting) about what they should be doing in their writing, and more, much more active involvement of students in the learning of skills and strategies that we want them to use in their writing. In other words, instead of telling students what a simile is, showing them a few examples on the overhead or on the blackboard (and perhaps having them underline a few in a paragraph written by T. S. Eliot or poem written by William Shakespeare), and then telling them that they now must use similies in their writing (because after all, "we taught it to them"; or "we

showed them how to do it"), what we need to do is to find ways to help students go through the process of creating their own original and exciting similies to describe phenomena they observe in the world. We need to find ways to give them opportunities to practice doing this until they have mastered it, and can use this technique with skill whenever they are given a task that requires description. This is what researchers call "active learning" or "experiential learning." This method places a premium on high levels of studet involvment. (This mode involves the teacher planning and using activities which result in high levels of student interaction concerning particular problems parallel to those they will encounter in certain kinds of writing.) The research is clear: When it comes to teaching composition, telling is the least effective way to teach students. The experiential method is **five** times more effective than the presentational.

In conjunction with less telling and more active/experiential learning, we know that at present not much is done at the prewriting stage of the composing process. Applebee (1981), for example, points out that in American schools less than five minutes elapses from the time teachers give assignments to the time students start writing. Much of the research and practice that has come out of the writing process movement has focused on the revising stage of the composing process. However, we know that focusing the attention of students on strategies for dealing with sets of data, strategies which **will** be used in writing has a powerful effect on the quality of student writing.. For example, it might involve students in finding and stating specific details which convey personal experience vividly, in examining sets of data to develop and support explanatory generalizations, or in analyzing situations which present social or ethical problems and in developing arguments about those situations. Focusing attention on

developing strategies in the prewriting stage (or inquiry) is nearly **four** times more effective than free writing and nearly **three** times more effective than the traditional study of model pieces of writing.

ACTIVITIES FOR TEACHING NARRATIVE/DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

The activities I am going to show you today for narrative/descriptive writing combine these two ideas: They focus on developing strategies important to writing in the prewriting stage of the composing process and they involve active/experiential learning.

"The Snake" Composition

I thought it might be useful to show you a couple of examples of the kind of writing you can get from students with the instruction I'm going to show you. The composition on the first page of your handout, "The Snake," was written by a 9th grade student after ten days of instruction with activities like I am going to show you (Appendix, p. 29). The assignment students were given was to write a description of a person, place or event. Students were given the same assignment before instruction and after instruction. Students were given one class period to write their compositions under test conditions, and they received no help from the teacher.

As I read the composition, note the students' use of specific details, figurative language, and the sharp focus. (Read.) Prior to instruction, this student was a capable writer, but his writing lacked effective use of details, used no sensory detail or figurative language, and it was not clearly focused.

As you will see in the instruction I am going to show you, the activities focused on these aspects of descriptive/narrative writing.

Student Pretest and Post-test

The next page of your handout contains an example of a student pretest and post-test (Appendix, pp. 30-31). This student was a remedial 7th grade student from the south side of Chicago who was part of one of our research studies on student writing. As I read the two compositions which the student wrote on the same topic, I think you will be able to see how the instruction helped the student improve her writing in the areas I just discussed.

"In The Act"

This first activity (Appendix, pp. 32-34) is designed to accomplish a number of things. First, it is designed to point out to students the importance of careful observation and the need to pay attention to specific details. In addition, it is designed to interest or engage students in some of the strategies that they will be learning in this set of activities. Finally, it is designed to give them practice in selecting and using specific details to create a description of a person.

I begin by passing out the sheet labelled "In The Act" (Appendix, p. 32). I tell students that they have one minute to study the drawing. After one minute, I either collect the drawing or have students turn it over on their desks with the direction that they cannot look at it until I tell them they can.

Then I pass out the next two sheets, "In The Act II" (Appendix, pp. 33-34). As you can see these sheets ask that students attempt to identify some very specific details about the man who is blanked out of the drawing on the first page of "In The Act II." I give students about five minutes to fill out the two sheets, which, as you can see, asks for everything from his age to whether or not he had dirt on his shoes--if in fact he was wearing shoes and not boots.

Once students have completed their sheets, I lead a class discussion of their answers. What becomes clear as the discussion develops is that students did not look very closely at the drawing. For example, in a class of twenty-five students, about 1/3 say the man was under 40 years of age, another 1/3 say he was from 40-60, and another 1/3 say he was over 60.

After we have discussed all of their answers--or if they just can't wait to look back at the original drawing--we look at the original sheet again to see how well they did. A few students have usually done pretty well at observing and noting details, but most students usually have not done very well. At this point, I refer to what they have done in the activity as being able to observe closely and pick out specific details. I sometimes mention that what they did in this activity is exactly what police investigators must do or what they might be asked to do if they witness a crime. This activity helps students see why they need to observe details carefully.

As a follow-up writing activity or practice, I have them write a description of the man focusing on the specific details they have marked on their "IN THE ACT II" sheets. In fact, I collect their "IN THE ACT I" drawings and make them write their description without the benefit of the drawing of the man.

The activity works in a number of ways:

- it captures their interest and attention;
- it increases the amount of student participation in class--I cannot overemphasize the importance of students orally practicing the skills they are going to use in writing and doing it in situations in which they must contend with the demand of an audience of their peers--interaction is so important; this activity produces high levels of student interaction as they discuss what they observed in the drawing;
- it introduces the importance of close observation;
- it makes students aware of the need to have specific details;
- it gives them practice in translating their observations into a written description.
- it gives them practice in using specific details to describe;
- and, they are actively involved in learning the skills they are going to be asked to use in writing.

Smells Activity

One day some years ago I was lamenting the fact that no matter what I did I couldn't get my students to use smell details in their writing. At the time I was standing in a check-out line at my local drug store buying, I think, some aspirin for my headache. I glanced over at the items on the point-of-purchase rack--oh, you know, the usual chewing gum, candy, and other assorted nonsense--and something struck my eye--Scratch-n'-sniff. If you haven't seen these wonderful little items, they come in packs of five to fifteen sheets and cost anywhere from $2.00 to $6.00. Each sheet has a set of one particular smell such as grape, motor oil, strawberry, peanut butter,

pizza, mint, or old shoes (There are four or five different smells per pack). The idea is that when you scratch the surface off of one of these circles, the odor of that smell comes through very strong. As I stood there looking at these marvelous items, I realized that at last I had found the answer to my students' smell problem. If I remember correctly, I put the bottle of aspirin back and bought a bunch of these sheets of Scratch-n'-sniff's. This activity requires that you have some of these Scratch-n'-sniff things.

I'm going to ask you to do this activity as I would have students do it. This will help give you a sense of the skills students are learning. Also, it will help you to anticipate potential difficulties students will have and consider ways to deal with them. Finally, it will give you a sense of the way this works in class with students.

I begin by putting students in small groups of three to five or sometimes in pairs. Then, I pass out the "Smells" activity sheet (Appendix, p. 35). Once each group or pair has a sheet, I go around the room and give each group or pair a different smell. Then, I briefly go over the directions. Note that the first question asks them to identify the smell. Fortunately, the makers of these"Scratch-n'-sniff things like to be cute. Often, the little picture on the circle that is designed to suggest what the smell is can be very misleading. This is good because it requires students to focus in on observing the smell closely.

I usually give students ten to twenty minutes to complete the activity sheet, and then I go over their answers. I begin by asking students to read the sentence they wrote for number 5. Of course, I comment on any effective details and figurative language students have used. Once all sentences have been read, I ask for volunteers to read the comparisons they made in number 4. Once again, I reinforce effective comparisons. Finally, I

discuss their answers to questions #2 and #3. Here students had to use synesthasia (using one sense to describe another) to describe their smells. The reason why this is in this activity is that unfortunately there are not many words in the English language for students to describe smells. Once again, I reinforce particularly effective description.

Students really enjoy hearing the smells that the other students have been working with and how they have described their smell. Usually, I try to use their curiosity as a springboard for the next step of the activity. I tell them that they are going to get an opportunity to describe a second smell. I put students back into groups or pairs (and sometimes on their own) and give them a second and different Scratch-n'-sniff (and activity sheet) to work on. This step reinforces the skills students have been introduced to the first time through. As a follow up writing activity, I would suggest having students write a description of a restaurant or the cafeteria or some other place where smell is important.

In this activity, students have learned to "closely observe" smells and various ways to describe smell, and even how to use figurative language to describe smells. I have modeled effective sentences for them to show them how to incorporate smell details into their writing. Notice also that I had students work with other students, and then I led a class discussion of what they came up with. In this way, there are high levels of student interaction, and they hear how others handled their descriptions. In the class discussion, I reinforce effective sensory description and figurative language. Again, they are doing all of this in the prewriting stage of the composing process.

Voluptuary Activity

Up to this point, students have been learning observing and describing skills and the focus has been on individual skills. That is, it has been on getting them to observe closely, become aware of the need for specific details, getting them to use specific details, getting them to use different kinds of sensory detials, and finally getting students to use figurative language. However, students have not has yet had to put all of these things together. This next activity is designed to do exactly that, and it is also designed to get them to focus their details toward a "dominant impression" or central focus as in the "Snake" composition I showed you earlier.

This activity utilizes James Gilray's 18th Century satiric drawing of the Prince of Whales. I begin by passing out the drawing (Appendix, p. 36). Then, I put students in small groups and have them list at least ten details to describe the man in the drawing. After ten minutes or so, I have students read their lists. Some students come up with things like, "He's fat" or "He's a slob!" Other students have details such as, "He's so fat he looks like he's pregnant with twins"; or, "His legs look like chicken drumsticks." As we discuss effective details and figurative language, students see what kinds of details effectively describe the man. We also discuss what the artist is saying about Prince Hal through the details in the drawing. Students realize that he is trying to show that he is a glutton.

As we discuss their lists and the details in the drawing and how they contribute to the overall impression the artist wants to convey of the man, I have students add details to their lists. Then, I give students the following assignment:

> Imagine that you walked into the room and saw Prince Hal.
> Write a letter to a friend of yours in which you describe

what you saw while you were in the room. Use the details in your description to make a point about what you saw.

I give students plenty of time to finish writing their compositions. They usually enjoy this assignment. There is something about this drawing that students find fascinating. I rarely have problems getting them to start writing.

This activity works in part because the drawing is interesting to students, there are many details--from a variety of senses, and it lends itself to figurative language. However, it also works because the details in the drawing contribute to a central impression which is exactly what I want students to do in writing their compositions. Prior to this activity students had not had to select sensory details that would contribute to a dominate impression. This activity helps them see that effective description utilizes details that contribute to a central impression.

Summary: Prewriting Activities

Unfortunately, I have only been able to show you three activities out of the approximately ten prewriting activities I use with students. I have activities that focus on getting students to use many specific details, activities for each of the five senses, some that combine the senses, one for figurative language, some for dialogue, some for how to describe bodily sensations, and two or three for selecting and organizing details for effect or impact. One important point, if you really want students to master the skills involved in producing any kind of writing, you need to spend time on it. Just doing one or two activities is probably not going to be enough for most

students. The idea is to give students opportunities to learn and practice skills that are important to the type of writing you want them to learn in a classroom environment that encourages student interaction and active learning. You also want to have students learn and practice using these skills in the prewriting stage of the composing process.

PEER EVALUATION--CRITERIA GUIDED REVISION ACTIVITIES

Research is also very clear about one other kind of writing activity that has a powerful effect on improving the quality of student writing. I call this kind of activity, "Criteria-Guided Rivision." What this means is instruction that focuses on scales, criteria, and specific questions which students apply to their own or others' writing. Through using the criteria systematically, students internalize them and bring them to bear in generating new material even when they do not have the criteria in front of them. "Criteria-guided revision" activities are more than **two** times more effective than free writing techniques. As with the other kind of activity I showed you, this kind of instruction works best when there are high levels of student interaction, and in fact, most often students do these activities in peer evaluation or response groups, and students have opportunities to practice using the criteria on other's writing before they apply apply it to their own. Let me show you an example of how this kind of activity works.

Peer Evaluation

However, I think it is important that I take a few moments to discuss peer evaluation. That is, the practice of having students meet in small

groups of three to five for the purpose of reading and giving feedback to one another on writing to help one another improve drafts. Peer evaluation has become very popular in recent years. When it first hit the scene I rather quickly jumped on the bandwagon, and frankly the more I worked with it, the more I began to have some problems with it. Yet, I think it has real value. And so, if you'll indulge me for a moment, I would like to examine its value, some problems, and how I have tried to overcome some of the problems.

Peer Evaluation--value of

There are a number of good reasons why we should use peer evaluation in teaching writing:

1. Revision is part of the writing process, and as teachers of writing, we have a responsibility to help students learn what writing is all about;
   a. we need to help them realize that the first idea that pops into their heads and that they hurridly jot down on a piece of paper is not the end of a written piece.
   b. we need to help them see that goo writing is usually the result of considerable struggle and often comes only after some revision has taken place.
2. It provides an audience response other than the teacher.
3. It helps expand their notion of audience: that is, they will begin to write with an audience in mind, improving the quality of their writing.
4. Peer evaluation helps students prepare for the writing they will

Have to do in the real world.

5. Evaluating the writing of peers helps students develop analytical and critical thinking skills.
6. It provides feedback to help students revise--we know that they are often more likely to revise when their peers tell them something needs revised than when the teacher tells them the same thing.
7. Students hear other students' papers, and as a result they compare these papers to their own and often have a much better sense of the quality of their paper in relation to the work of other students.
8. Peer evaluation activities help students become more accurate judges of the strengths and weaknesses of their own writing.
9. One immediate benefit is that it serves as a final check before students turn in a final paper, and thereby can serve to improve the quality of the final papers that are turned in for a grade.
10. It can serve to improve the classroom climate with students helping other students improve their writing before they turn in their compositions for a grade.
11. More students bring in rough drafts to class if they know it will be read by peers.
12. Peer evaluation activities take the "mystery" out of writing assignments. That is, students know what is expected of them, and, as a result, have a more positive attitude toward the assignment and writing in general.
13. It can make grading easier for the teacher--as a result of the feedback they have received and the fact that they know how their

papers stack up to others, grading is often less of a chore.

14. Teachers can extricate themselves from the position of being a personal editor for each and every student. We have to realize that students are going to get away with as much as we will let them. As long as we are going to do their editing and proofreading for them, students are going to let us do it.
15. Evaluating writing becomes a much more pleasant task for the the teacher when we know that they are going to be good quality.

There are probably many other reasons why peer evaluation is important, but these are certainly some important reasons why it is.

Peer Evaluation--some problems

However, there are some problems with peer evaluation:

1. Some students have trouble being critical of their peers' writing--I call this the "everything is wonderful syndrome."
2. On the other hand, some students are exactly the reverse: they are too critical. Almost nothing that anybody writes is any good.
3. Students sometimes focus on the wrong things. They might dwell on the choice of a word here or there, and the real problem is that the student says nothing in the essay.
4. Many teachers complain that peer evaluation activities are time consuming and take time away from other aspects of the curriculum.

Peer Evaluation--overcoming some of the difficulties

Here are some strategies that I and other teachers use to overcome some of the problems I outlined:

1. Students need training and practice in peer evaluation before you ask them to evaluate other students writing that they will be turning in to the teacher for a grade.
2. You can't assume that they know how to do it; chances are they know little or nothing about peer response.
3. Without some training and practice, most peer response activities will not be very effective. Student responses to peers' writing will likely be superficial and not very helpful.
4. Without training and practice, student simply lack the critical and analytical skills necessary to effectively evaluate their peers or their own writing.
5. The kind of instruction I am suggesting helps students overcome much of their reluctance to be negatively critical about each others' writing; that is criteria guided revision activities.
6. You need to make it clear to students that the purpose of peer response or evaluation is to help them write better compositions. This is something that often gets lost in the process and is very important if students are going to take such activities seriously.
7. Students in groups read and critique three-to-five student written compositions that represent a range of quality. All need to see the same compositions.
8. They need to practice applying specific criteria--they work with the criteria that represent the skills and strategies they have been

taught and will be evaluated on.

9. In addition to working with the criteria in peer response groups, they need to discuss their findings in a whole class situation (after small group work) to make sure they understand the criteria.
10. Students should practice revising compositions written by others utilizing specific criteria before they revise their own writing.
11. Then, students are ready to critique one another's writing using the same criteria.
12. Use various kinds of structured criteria sheets with questions, check responses and, levels of quality to overcome difficulties with peer evaluation.
13. Use a variety of strategies for peer response activities to overcome difficulties and encourage effective peer response:
    a. have small groups switch compositions and evaluate the papers from another group--no one is reading a paper of a student sitting there in the group;
    b. Another strategy is to switch classes. That is, have your second period class rate the papers from your sixth period class.
    c. When I have students meet in small groups, I have the group read one composition at a time, and fill out one sheet per paper.
    d. After some practice in small groups have students work in pairs instead of small groups.
    e. After some practice have students evaluate papers individually. When I have students rate papers individually, I simply collect all the papers, hand out three or four sheets to each student and then give each student someone else's paper. When a student finishes a paper, he or she raises his or her hand and I give that

student another paper. By the end of the period each student's paper has been read by three or four other students.

f. You might even need to count the evaluations of other students' work as part of their composition grade.

14. Using structured response sheets has a number of advantages for the student and teacher:

a. When the student gets his or her composition and evaluation sheet back he or she can quickly and clearly see what the strengths and weaknesses of the paper are; therefore, revising is easier. The student knows what needs to be done to improve the paper.

15. For the teacher making comments on student compositions, the job is simplified. Instead of writing comments explaining what needs to be done, all the teacher needs to do is refer to a comment, checked item, or rated item on the peer evaluation sheet.

Criteria Guided Revision Activity

Now, let me show you a few Criteria Guided Revision activities that utilize peer response groups. These kinds of activity seems to work best near the end of a sequence of activities like the ones I have just shown you, perhaps just before students are given their final assignments. What you need to do is give students four or five compositions that represent different levels of quality, like the four compositions you see next in your handout (Appendix, pp. 37-41). Along with the compositions give them a set of questions, a check sheet, or in some way give them guidelines that represent

the criteria that will be used in evaluating or determining the quality of the type of writing under consideration.

The sheet you see after the four compositions (Appendix, p. 42) is one that I have used a number of times. It involves sections that help students evaluate the set of compositions, and also it includes sections to help them see what makes a particular composition strong or weak, and it also gets them to think about what needs to be done to strengthen a weak composition.

Notice that the sheet is keyed to the instruction that I have just shown you, and that it is set up to be done in small groups. I have tried having students evaluate compositions on their own, but it just does not work as well. It is much more effective if they have the interaction and support of a small group.

What I do is pass out the four compositions and have students read them on their own. Then I pass out the evaluation sheet, and go over it with them to make sure they understand the criteria and how to do it. Then, I put them in small groups and have the groups fill out the sheet for the set of compositions. When they have finished, I have a whole class discussion of their findings.

The discussions are often quite lively and interesting. For example, while most students rank "Zipper," as the best one, followed by "The Hit," followed by "My Adventure," with "The Greatest Moment of My Life" as the weakest composition, some students start out arguing that "The Hit" is the best one, followed by "Zipper." As we discuss their reasons, students often say something like, "Well, 'The Hit' is more direct. It tells you what happened." Yes, that is true other students argue, but the problem is that is all that it does. There is no excitement to the experience and there should

be. In contrast, the writer of "Zipper," tells us what happened and also shows how it felt to experience the ride on the Zipper. Ultimately, students see the difference between the two compositions and why "Zipper" is probably a little better. Finally, students generate ideas for what needs to be done to improve one of the compositions.

REVISING A COMPOSITION USING CRITERIA

Up to this point, students have used the criteria to evaluate and rank compositions. This an important step in helping them learn the criteria that they will ultimately use on their peers' and their own writing. However, now students need to actually revise a weak composition using the criteria. On the next two pages of your handout (Appendix, pp. 43-44), you will find "The Soccer Game" composition and a set of guide questions, designed to help students go about improving this composition. First let me read the composition. (Read.)

Now, if you'll look at the questions (Appendix, p. 44), you can see that they are carefully set up to help student generate ideas and details that could be used to improve the composition. Again, note that the questions are keyed to the instructional sequence I have shown you. I pass this sheet out to students and have them work in small groups to generate ideas and details. Then, I usually have a class discussion of their answers--sometimes I skip the discussion if they are not having any trouble--and then I either have each small group produce a revised essay or have each student write a revision of the essay utilizing the answers to the questions.

Let me just read to you one revision a middle school student wrote of this composition (Appendix, p. 45). (Read.) I think you can see how this

kind of activity helps students internalize the criteria for a good piece of writing of this type, which also seems to help them to improve the writing of others, make them much better judges of their own writing, and, in the end, helps students to improve the quality of their own writing.

"Evaluation Sheet: Descriptive/Narrative Writing"

Once students have revised someone else's composition, like "The Soccer Game," they are ready to apply the criteria to their peers and their own writing. I use the evaluation evaluation sheet on the next two pages of your handout (See Appendix, pp. 46-47) when students write a final descriptive/narrative essay on a topic of their choice. When they bring in their drafts, I have them meet in small groups and critique one another's compositions using this same sheet. Then, I have the groups return compositions and sheets to the writers, who then use the comments from their peers and the criteria on the evaluation sheets to make revisions in their own drafts before they turn them in to the teacher for a grade.

CONCLUSION

What I have tried to do here today is to show you some practical classroom activities for teaching narrative/descriptive writing based on approaches to teaching writing that research indicates have a powerful effect on improving the quality of student writing. In addition, I have tried to show you how you can design exciting instruction that will help students improve their writing. I want to suggest to you that if you use the strategies for teaching composition that I have shown you here today, you will see the

quality of your students' writing begin to improve. Using these strategies will enable you to break away from the much less effective traditional approach to teaching composition.

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APPENDIX

STUDENT ACTIVITY SHEETS

The Snake

In the huge, dark caverns created by the Amazon jungle, a snake wound its way slowly down the trunk of a tall, mighty, vine-covered tree. The snake was thick, with emerald green skin and golden plates. Its eyes were alive with a crimson red, and a blue tongue flicked quickly from between its scaly lips. As it reaches a lofty bough, it uncoiled itself and hung down like a rope loosely twisted around a stick.

The snake dropped quickly now, for it had spotted a small hog drinking at the river's edge. So swiftly and silently did it race down and sleekly slip into the cool, clear water that not a sound was made. The hog look up and then lowered his head again to drink the fresh, clean water. Silently the snake whipped his body into motion, undulating rapidly through the river pools. His head keenly cut the water and his trailing body churned under-currents that barely broke the surface. He could see the hog now. He let himself sink to the bottom and trailed along the crevices letting his eyes and nostrils faintly break the surface.

The hog drank still, quenching his thirst. Now the snake violently whipped his head, digging wildly into the boar's leg. The hog shrieked and squealed, kicking wildly and pulling away. The snake pulled back and whipped a coil of his body tightly around the hog's neck., then another and another until he and the hog tumbled violently into the shallows. He pulled his might constricting muscles together and there were a few sudden snaps. He dragged the hog away after relinquishing his hold and silently ate it below the cool turquoise depths.

Write about a person, place or event (real or imaginary) that interests you in some way. Be as specific as you can in describing the person, place, or event. Try to write so that a reader of your composition will see what you saw and feel what you felt.

PRETEST

My birthday is coming up. I hope I get almost all the things I asked for, and maybe the rest of the things I didn't get for my birthday I can get for Christmas. I know I'm getting an electronic game. My brother is giving it to me. I don't know a single seventh grade girl who has a wild fire, but since my brother doesn't have his ten dollars anymore ... I'm assuming he bought it with his own money, and I'd hurt his feelings if I didn't take it. So I'll take it, and thank him for it. I really try not to pick on my brother, or any seven year old, for that matter, but sometimes they get in your way. I guess my favorite holiday is my birthday, so I hope I get what I want.

POSTTEST

I was half scared and half excited. All night I had practiced my times table chart. I got up and walked to the bathroom and took a nice hot shower. I thought about how I would like my new teachers, or how they would like me. I got out of the shower and started to dry myself. The thing I wanted most was to be in the same class as Tracy. She wasn't one of my best friends, we had gotten in plenty of fights, but still when you're going to a new school, anyone you can pal around with would be great.

Our doorbell rang. It was 8:25 just as I popped the last bit of toast into my mouth. I ran to the front hall and opened the door. There was Tracy. She said, "C'mon, or we'll be late!" Marian, Tracy's mom, had brought her car around. I hopped in and we drove off.

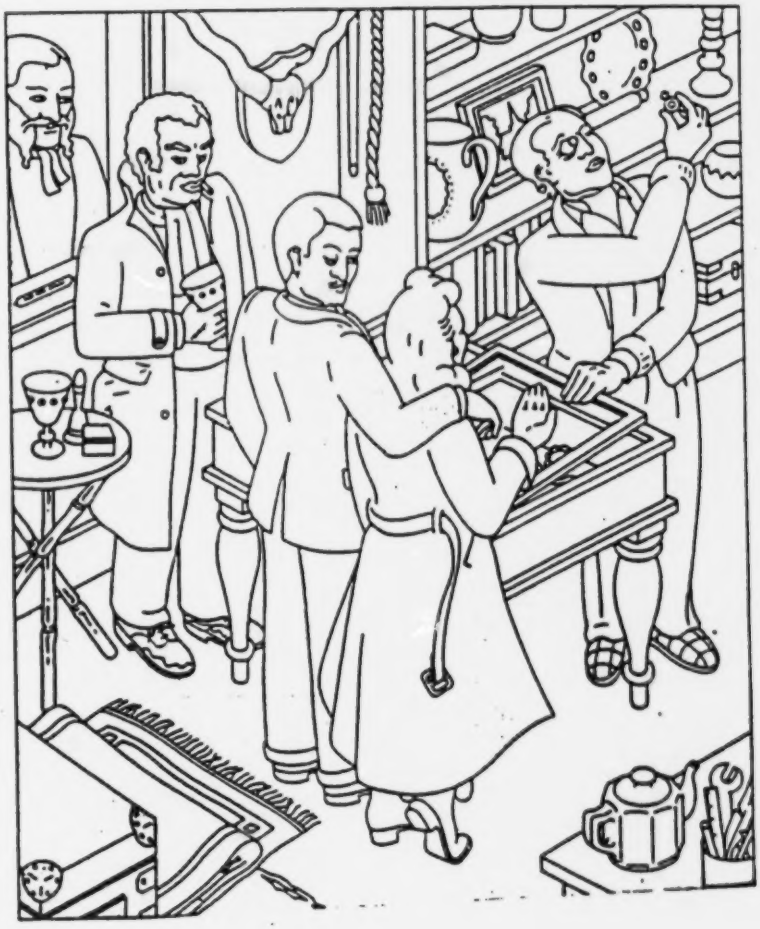
As we got nearer and nearer to school, my heart started pounding like a volcano about to erupt. We got out of the car, and someone told us that if we were new we should go to the auditorium. So we finally found it, and there were already about one hundred people there. The lady on the stage was dressed in black and white. Her hair reminded me of the Gloria Vanderbilt lady. She had spectacles on and was talking about rules and regulations. We sat down near the edge. She went on with her lecture for about forty-five minutes. It was really boring, but I listened. Finally, at the end, she called out names and room numbers. I was in 314 and Tracy was in 315. I felt my heart jump and I could tell Tracy wasn't the happiest person on earth either. This guy came down to our row and told us to follow him to the room.

By the time I got up to the third floor, my feet felt like a ton each, and the rest of my body was well exhausted. We walked into a room marked 314, and the man left. I was all alone with everyone staring at me. Finally, my teacher broke the silence and said, "Find a seat. I'm your homeroom teacher, Mrs. Lanier. I will tell you what you need for this room."

I sat down in back of a girl. She turned around and said, "Hi. Welcome to Ray School. I'm Clara."

That's how I came to Ray.

IN THE ACT



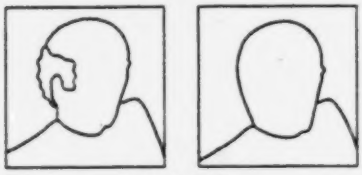
IN THE ACT II*

Age:
Under 40 ☐ 40-60 ☐ Over 60 ☐
Height:
Under 6 feet ☐ Over 6 feet ☐
Weight:
Thin ☐ Medium ☐
Overweight ☐
Identifying marks:
Birthmark ☐
Scars ☐
Wearing a ring?
Yes ☐ No ☐

Lips:
Full ☐ Thin ☐
Lower lip bulging ☐
Ears:
Small ☐ Close to head ☐
Large lobes ☐
Face shape:
Round ☐ Oval ☐ Square ☐

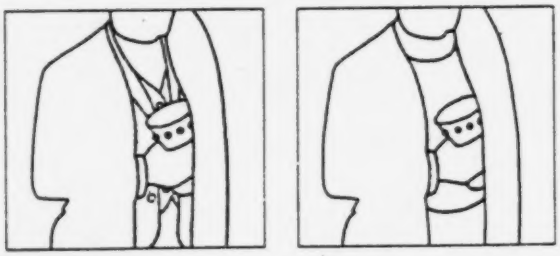
Was he wearing a hat? Yes ☐ No ☐
Beret ☐ Flat cap ☐

Was his hair
Curly ☐ Short ☐ Slicked down ☐ Dishevelled ☐

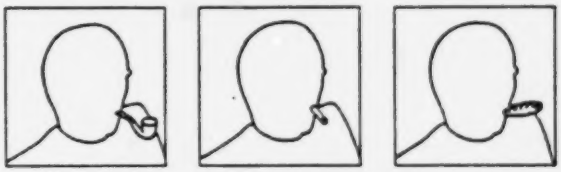


Was he bald?
Slightly ☐ Completely ☐

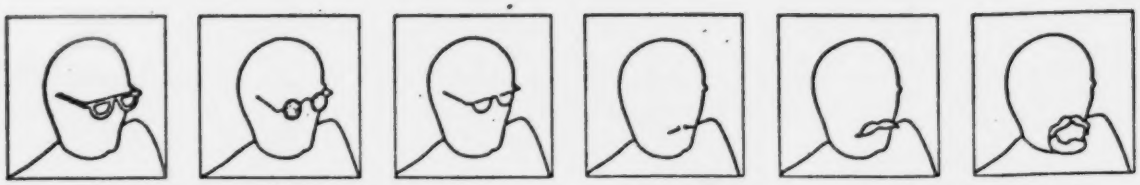
Was his nose
Roman ☐ Broken ☐ Strawberry ☐ Pointed ☐



What was he wearing under his coat?
suit ☐ jersey ☐

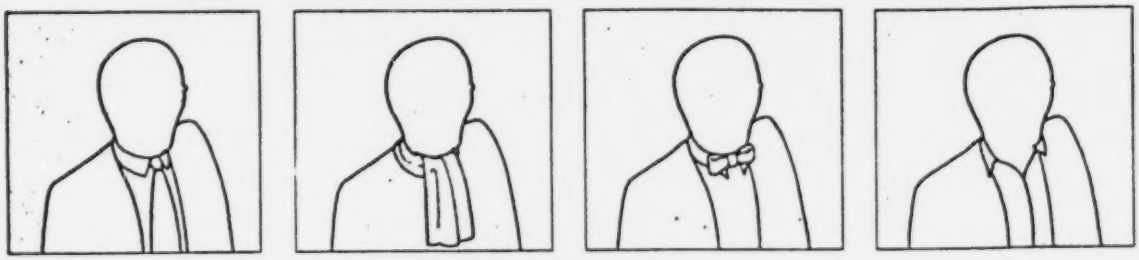


Was he smoking? Yes ☐ No ☐
Pipe ☐ Cigarette ☐ Cigar ☐

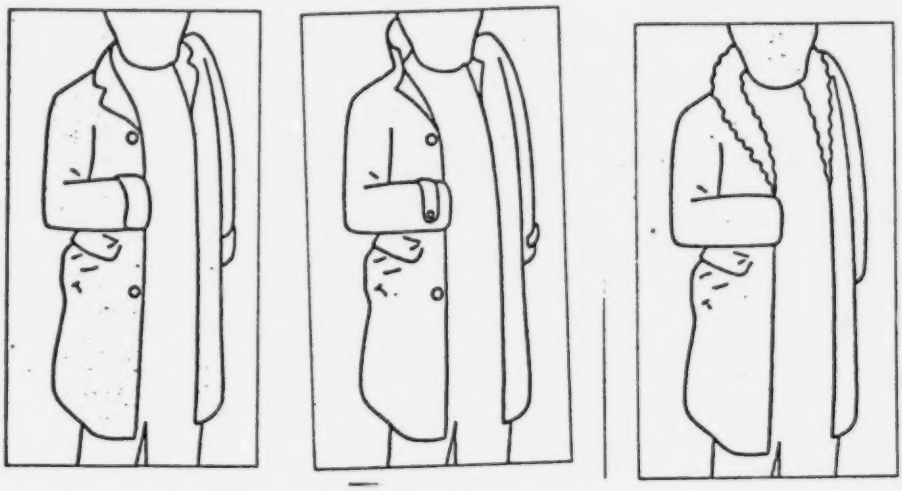


Was he wearing glasses? Yes ☐ No ☐
Horn rims ☐ Dark glasses ☐ Half frames ☐

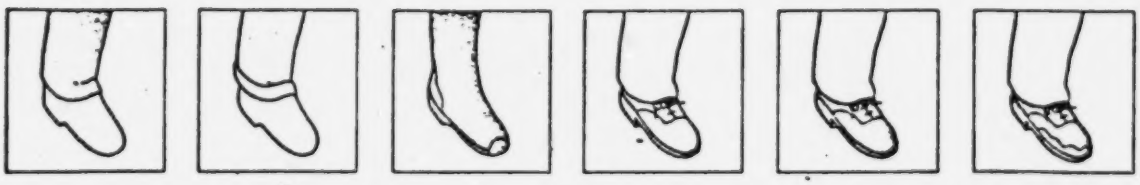
Was he clean shaven? Yes ☐ No ☐ Trimmed moustache ☐
Full moustache ☐ Moustache and beard ☐



What was he wearing around his neck?
Tie ☐ Scarf ☐ Bowtie ☐ Nothing ☐



What kind of coat did he wear? overcoat ☐ Raincoat
coat with fur collar ☐ Was the collar turned up? Yes ☐ No ☐



Was he wearing Boots ☐ shoes ☐ Were they clean? Yes ☐ No ☐

*adapted from Lawrence Treat. The Clue Armchair Detective. New York: Ballantine Books, 1983.

SMELLS

1. Identify the substance that you smell _____

2. How does the smell feel? Smooth? Abrasive? Rough? Give at least three words.

_____

_____

_____

3. How does it move? Does it creep, surround, push, etc.?

_____

_____

4. Compare the smell to something else that will help describe it.

The smell is like _____

5. Combine the best details you have written into a sentence that identifies the substance and describes its smell. Imagine that you have just entered a place and noticed this smell.

Example: As I opened the door, the rasping stink of the ammonia kicked me in the face.

_____

_____

_____

_____

A VOLUPTUARY under the horrors of Digestion.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

MY ADVENTURE

During the hot, dry summer when mostly everyone is swimming in the cool, sparkling waters of pools, my family and me were heading toward Dayton, Ohio. We left early in the sunny morning even before the cheerful, whistling birds. I was going because I was competing in championships for Irish dancing. I wasn't extremely nervous but more excited than anything else. We finally arrived and stopped at this new high-rise hotel. The next day was the big day. Before I danced I put on my orange-red celtic costume with embroidery from the Book of Kelts. Then it was time to dance. My dancing was good. I had high leaps, it looked like I was dancing in air. But all of a sudden when I was spinning around, I fell. But I got up and finished the step. I didn't win 1-3, but I placed 4th. If I hadn't fallen, I would have won. But everyone said I was a good sport. That was my prize of the day.

THE HIT

As I stepped up to the plate, I could hear the quiet cheers of the crowd in back of me. I laid down my bat on the just swept plate. I could feel my palms begin to sweat as the night air blew a gust of wind past my body. I reached down and picked up some dirt, and as I did, I could feel the heat from the large lights of the ballpark.

I stood up and took a step back from the plate to take a couple of practice swings. My muscles felt tight but began to loosen up as I swung the bat. Finally, the umpire said, "OK, let's play ball!"

I felt my adrenalin pump through my body. I knew that I had to hit a home run because it was the ninth inning with two outs against us, and we had our worst hitter coming up after me. I laid the bat on my shoulder very gently and took a deep breath while waiting for the pitcher to go into his windup. Finally, the pitcher nodded his head to show he agreed with the signal from the catcher, and he leaned back into his windup. To me he looked almost motionless until he reached forward and released the ball into its swirling orbit. The ball came so fast that it almost caught me off guard. I knew if I waited any longer the ball would go whirling past me, and I would miss a perfect pitch. So I swung the bat around with all my might and hoped that I would make contact. I knew that I really hit the ball because I heard a cracking noise and then I felt a tingling sensation running from my fingers up to my forearm.

At first I could not see the ball in the night sky so I almost thought that I had hit it out of bounds. Yet I heard the crowd cheering so I knew that ball must still be flying in the air. Then I spotted it sailing way up in the sky.

I dropped my bat and ran while at the same time keeping an eye on the ball. I rounded first still running my hardest. Half way to second I dropped my head and put all my might into it because I saw the ball drop right in front of the left fielder's feet. I knew I had to get all the way home. I rounded second, the third base coach signaled for me to stop at third, but I knew that I could make it. I rounded third at full steam, took a wide turn, and headed for home. I saw the catcher getting ready to catch the ball so I took a diving leap, stretching all my muscles to touch home plate.

I hit the ground with a thump and began to slide. I could not see anything through all of the dust. I reached for the plate and looked up at the umpire. He stood there very still, and then both arms flung to the side as he called me "Safe!"

The Greatest Moment of My Life

The greatest moment of my life was immagrating to the United States from Cambodia because, we were made slaves. Our family had to work the whole week for 18 hours in the midst of summer on the rice fields and only one meal aday; it was not tasty, only rice and water. It was terrifying living in a country of death. We were lucky to come to the United States or we might not be alive; for it was a nun who took us out of our horrifying life. It was strange at first to be in another country of freedom, buildings and automobiles but we learned to live a normal life, by going to school, our parents having a job. United States is a great country compared to Cambodia.

ZIPPER

When I arrived at the carnival, it was packed. It was night-time and the air was warm, not hot. The florescent lights encircling the rides illuminated the sky, and bit into the darkness. There were screams from the general direction of the Zipper, and they attracted my friends and I to it. It was towering above everything, except the Ferris Wheel. It was 70 cents for a ticket, 20 cents more than most of the other rides, but that just made it seem more worthwhile. As we stood in line, we could hear the groaning and screeching of the gears as they moved faster. The cars were tossed upside down with seemingly no effort. There was loud blaring music, so distorted it was impossible to distinguish the words. Finally it was our turn, and three of us entered the small, cramped car. The seats were cracked leather, and the whole car was padded. There were bars to hold onto, they had been painted a bright yellow, but the paint had long since chipped off where people had held tightly onto it. The car started upwards with a protesting groan, and when it reached the top it flopped over, and we were tossed around like rag dolls. It was impossible to stay seated in one place for very long, and every time we turned someone gave an involuntary scream. Finally we slowed and when they opened the door we stumbled out on rubbery, weak legs. We staggered around for awhile, and then headed back for the ticket office.

EVALUATION SHEET: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE COMPOSITIONS

Directions: Carefully read the four compositions and answer the following questions.

1. Which composition do you think is **best** in describing a place or event so that the reader can see, feel, and hear what is being described?

2. Which composition is **weakest** in describing a place or event so that the reader can see, feel, and hear what is being described?

3. What does the weakest composition lack?

4. What specific details does the best composition include?

5. What sensory details in addition to sight does the best composition include?

6. What comparisons are used in the best composition?

7. What kind of overall impression does the best composition create for the reader?

8. What are the most effective details in the two middle compositions?

9. What comparisons, if any, are included in the two middle compositions?

10. Select one of the middle compositions, and explain what needs to be done to it to make it as good as the best composition?

THE SOCCER GAME

Last weekend I was in a soccer game against Hammond. It was almost the end of the game when I scored for our team. Our Coach called me out of the game. He welcomed me to the side with a cheering smile. He yelled, "That's the way to do it" and he asked How I got the goal. I replied, I got a pass from Charlie and I kicked the ball inches from the goalie and then it went in." My coach said, "That I'm improving at the game and that I will be fantastic in the years to come." As I sat down on the boggy grass, my dad came over and he commented on the great score I made. I said, "I just got lucky." My dad asked, "If I needed a ride at the end of the game" and I said, "yes, I need a ride." Then me and my family drove home from the thrilling soccer game.

Personal Narrative: Revision Sheet

Directions: Read "The Soccer Game" composition. Then, answer the following questions about the composition.

1. Suppose you were a movie director making a film called "A Thrilling Game." They gave you this script. What scene do you think is missing? Why?

2. Try to visualize the scoring of the goal from the moment the writer gets the first pass. What do you see? Hear?

3. Describe how the scorer feels as he is going down the field. What's he thinking about? What are some of his bodily sensations?

4. What does he see? What does he hear?

5. Describe in detail the scoring of the goal and what happened immediately after.

6. Describe the behavior of the scorer and describe how he felt immediately after he scored.

(STUDENT REVISION)

"THE SOCCER GAME"

There was a minute left in the thrilling soccer game. Our team, the Vikings, was tied with Hammond one to one. I was dribbling the ball at a fast pace down the field, I could hear the other team's feet trembling against the hard, dry ground. The light-weight soccer ball was glidding over the hard surface every time I gave it a soft tap. My heart started pumping faster as I closed up on the other goalie. My teammate, Charlie, was following me on my right side. My feet felt like two humming birds flying to their nests. The fullback on the other team was pushing my shoulders, trying to lure the ball away. I passed to ball to Charlie who was just a few feet ahead of me. He dribbled the ball to the goalie box, then he centered it to me. I started shaking like a leaf as I kicked the ball past the darting goalie and into the big goal net. I started jumping for joy as my teammates came around me to share my happiness.

Evaluation Sheet: Descriptive/Narrative Writing

Name of writer _____

Names of evaluators _____

_____

Very Good to Excellent - 4 *Good* - 3 *Satisfactory* - 2 *Unsatisfactory* - 1

I. Use of specific detail _____

A. List several of the most specific details the writer includes:

B. Mark with a "*" any places in the composition where more detail should be included.

II. Use of detail and imagery from a variety of senses _____

A. Check each sense described effectively:

Sight _____
Sound _____
Touch _____
Smell _____
Taste _____

B. The writer should add details from which other senses to the composition?

Where?

III. Use of figurative language (simile, metaphor, etc.) _____

A. List several examples of figurative language used effectively in the composition.

IV. Use of dialogue and/or direct quotations _____

A. Mark with a "+" any places where the writer could effectively include dialogue and/or direct quotations.

V. Clear central or dominant impression _____

A. What central or dominant impression do you think the writer is trying to create for the reader?

B. What parts of the composition are best in creating this impression? Why?

C. What parts are least effective in creating this impression? Why?

TOTAL _____